

**PASS THE MUSTARD!**  
**Sermon, June 17, 2018**  
**Father's Day**  
**Texts: Mark 4:26-34; II Corinthians 5:6-17**

Three years ago last May, a new word was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary: "Eggcorn". An eggcorn is defined as "a word or phrase that sounds like and is mistakenly used in a seemingly logical or plausible way for another word or phrase."<sup>1</sup> Some examples of eggcorns: "Spread like wildflowers" is an eggcorn when used instead of "spread like wildfire." "Coldslaw" is an eggcorn if you meant "coleslaw." "Self phone" is an eggcorn of "cell phone." So is getting "a new leash on life" (the correct phrase is a new lease on life), "scandally clad" instead of "scantily clad" (and it makes a little sense; being scantily clad can lead to scandal!). "Eggcorn" itself is an eggcorn, as acorns do have something of an egg shape and eventually "hatch" into oaks. The sermon title is an eggcorn, unless you said this at the church picnic last week. The correct phrase is "Pass the Muster", or as it is usually expressed, "pass muster." The derivation is that when military troops are **mustered**, they are being assembled for a review. A soldier who passes inspection is said to "pass muster." We use this phrase for all kinds of things and processes that pass approval, or meet a certain standard. Now, a related phrase is the idiom "cut the mustard," which means relatively the same thing. One *passes muster* and one *cuts the mustard*, but **pass the mustard** is an eggcorn ... unless, again, you were at the church picnic last week.

And I relish this opportunity to help you ketchup with these new developments in the English language.

*Pass the muster* has been around longer than *cut the mustard*, but as mentioned, both mean relatively the same thing ... to perform satisfactorily, to suffice; to be good or effective enough ... as in "Give me the bigger hammer. This little one just doesn't cut the mustard." Why "cutting mustard" is an idiom used in this manner is unclear. One theory is that "cutting" has also long been used to mean "exhibiting," as in the phrase "cutting a fine figure" ... a person who cuts a fine figure is someone who looks good. So, the theory goes, someone who is "cutting the mustard" is exhibiting or displaying one's ability or capability to look good, and/or do something well. Another theory about the origin of this idiom: Mustard plants are hard to cut down, because they are tough and stringy and grow densely (not unlike rhubarb, as I learned years ago), so "cutting the mustard" in this sense involves displaying a measure of strength and tenacity and persistence. Another theory of origin is that it comes from the preparation of culinary mustard: Mustard is cut (i.e., diluted), made more palatable, by the addition of vinegar. So, "cutting the mustard" in this sense is making something or some situation more palatable or pleasing by your skill, presence or efforts. Or, for another take altogether, spreading mustard with a knife isn't that tough ... so the negative expression "can't even cut the mustard" is disparaging in that mustard is easier to "cut" at the table than butter. In short, nobody knows the real origin of the idiom; we just know that it means to be good or effective enough, to perform satisfactorily; in short, to pass muster (not mustard).

Some of you are old enough to remember a 1952 song by Marlene Dietrich and Rosemary Clooney (Rosemary Clooney was a co-star with Bing Crosby, she was also the aunt of present movie star George Clooney). "Too Old To Cut The Mustard."<sup>2</sup> The chorus went like this: "Too old, too old; He's too old to cut the mustard anymore. He's gettin' too old, too old He's too old to cut the mustard anymore. Stanza One, sung by the sultry German star Marlene: "Once I kissed a millionaire, Ran my fingers through his hair, The whole thing turned out pretty grim, 'Cause none of his hair belonged to him!" (Chorus) Stanza Two, sung by Rosemary: "A gent I know with a big sedan, Swore he was an army man, But he got dressed up fit to kill, In the uniform he wore at Bunker Hill:" (Chorus), Third stanza, by Marlene: "I entertained an actor I know, The moon was high and the lights were low, He said I'd like to play the scene, But it's time to drink my Ovaltine." (Chorus) (BTW, if you know what Ovaltine is, you're showing your age!) And they joined together on the last stanza: "It seems that every man you meet Wants to sweep you off your feet. But gals, before you do submit, Make him show his birth certificate." (Chorus)

Well, in today's epistle, the apostle Paul tell us in so many words that through the grace of Jesus Christ we are never too old, too young, too uneducated, too poor, too *anything* to pass muster or to cut the mustard! It is never too late to start over and try again. Today and any day can be a new starting point. If there are some regrets about our lives up to this point not passing muster, well, our lives can be redeemed. "If anyone is in Christ," writes Paul, "he is a new creation." In Jesus Christ, today can be a new starting point for any of us. We can offer ourselves to Jesus

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/05/30/410504851/eggcorns-the-gaffes-that-spread-like-wildflowers>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kEBlmSX904>

Christ this day and ask Him for help in making up for lost time, in showing love, and in setting the right kind of example for those who look to us; in short, in seeking His help and grace to help us cut the mustard!

On Father's Day six years ago I shared with you one of the **Family Circus'** (Bil Keane) more memorable Father's Day cartoons (*I think it first appeared in the 80s, but don't know for sure*). Dad is depicted relaxing in his recliner reading the newspaper. He turns to see little Billy carrying his ball, bat and glove. Billy says, "*Anytime you're ready, Daddy, I'll be sitting outside growing older.*" Ouch. I've been there more often than I care to admit. I still wince when I remember how Steve in his much younger years would ask me to have catches with him, and many times I said, "Yes", but there were times I said "No" because I was too tired, too stressed or, frankly, too lazy to do anything but sit in my recliner. One time I remember feeling especially guilty was when I heard this THUMP .... THUMP ... THUMP on the outside steps. Little Steve had very creatively figured out a way to bounce the baseball on the front steps in such a way that it would pop back to him, enabling him to have a catch with himself! And I sat there thinking with each thump -- "*I'm not (THUMP) cutting the mustard (THUMP) as a father.*"

On this Father's Day, I'll state the obvious ... it's not easy being a parent. We want to be the best we can for our children, we want to have time and energy for them, we want to *cut the mustard* as parents as in everything we do in life, but we have limitations, we have shortcomings, we have faults, we have tempers, we grow tired and preoccupied, we have struggles of our own .... but we nevertheless do want our children to have the best. And not just for selfish purposes ... although I do like how Phyllis Diller once put it, "*I want my children to have all the things I couldn't afford. Then I want to move in with them.*" On a serious note ... what we should never grow tired of giving our children is the example of our integrity. Scottish poet William Soutar wrote, "*If I have been privileged to catch a more comprehensive glimpse of life than many other men, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of my parents.*" The truth of the matter is that all of us stand on the shoulders of our parents ... and the straighter and taller and truer our parents stood, the better view of life we have been privileged to enjoy. And in parenting as in all things, we are never too old to stand taller, to display our best, to pass muster, to cut the mustard.

In our Gospel text, Jesus says "*This is what the Kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.*" Jesus is not giving us a lesson on agriculture; He is telling us about the kingdom of God. He is saying the very tiniest of seeds that are sown can go on to produce an enormous harvest, so be an old sow and sow and start sowing your seeds of kindness, selflessness, generosity, faithfulness, love and service everywhere you can; it is never too late! Not all seeds will take root, but some will! Growth happens, even if we can't always see it. Jesus continues, "*The seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain -- first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.*" Centuries later we still don't know what causes a seed to sprout. Agriculturists and scientists have yet to be able to create a synthetic seed that grows. Growth is a mystery. Our task is to sow seeds, and trust God for the growth. Starting now.

A few times over the past years I told you of a sign at a tree nursery which advertised, "*The Best Time To Plant a Tree ... Was Twenty-Five Years Ago.*" Then below that it read: "*The second best time to plant a tree ... is right now.*" Yes, the best time to plant, say, an apple tree would have been years ago; you would be eating its abundant fruit today if you had planted it back then. In like manner, there are all sorts of things we could have or should have done differently in our lives decades ago, years ago, months ago, even days ago ... things which, if we had done them or said them ... would be producing great fruit in our lives today. However ... the *second* best time to plant a seed for a tree is right now. Today. We can't go back twenty-five years and plant what should have been planted back then. We wish we could, but we can't. But we *can* get busy planting seeds and/or trees right now!

In the second half of our Gospel text for the day, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God and mustard. He says, "*What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.*" The mustard plant is a shrub, and in that part of the world it is the largest of all the shrubs. From tiny seeds big things can happen! We never know how something we might do, however small, might affect someone else. The funny thing is that we may not even think that what we did was all that important, but to another person it might make a world of difference. Jesus taught us the kingdom of God is like that. Little things can make a world of difference. In fact, great things happen from small beginnings. The parable of the mustard seed is a word of encouragement for us. Things might not be what we want them to be, we might think we're not "cutting the mustard," but God is at work, and God still works in mysterious ways. He is the source of growth.

Are there some seeds we could be planting today? Some word of love, some act of encouragement? Some mustard seed you could scatter today? Pass the mustard! You're never too old, too young, too anything to do so ... by the grace of Jesus Christ, it's never too late to start.